



# THE WAVE

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## U.S.C.G. NATIONAL MARITIME CENTER NEWSLETTER

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## Captain's Log

Milestones are being met and new records are being reached as we continue the centralization of the MLD program. The ribbon cutting ceremony was a significant event in our efforts to improve the program. On June 30th, the 15th REC began the transition to centralized operations when REC Miami began sending new credential applications to the NMC for processing.

Since January, the number of applications processed by the RECs and sent to NMC for evaluation have increased by over 440% and will continue increasing through the rest of 2008. The number of credentials issued through the centralized processes has increased 798% since January. In fact, a new record was reached in June when the NMC issued more than 3,200 credentials.

(See Captain's Log on Page 8)

## U.S. Coast Guard Dedicates National Maritime Center

### Rear Admirals Salerno, Watson Pay Tribute to Mariners during Ceremony

MARTINSBURG – The U.S. Coast Guard unveiled the new National Maritime Center (NMC), a 60,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art, energy efficient and environmental-friendly facility permanently located in Martinsburg, West Virginia, during a dedication and ribbon cutting ceremony Thursday.

With the christening of the NMC, the Coast Guard has marked a "major milestone" in its efforts to centralize the Mariner Licensing and Documentation (MLD) program while still retaining 17 Regional Examination Centers (REC) as storefronts and advocates for mariners. In addition, the NMC also houses the Merchant Mariner Training Course Approval and Oversight programs.

The more than 220,000 merchant mariners, who "keep our economy going, keep our waters  
(See Dedication Ceremony on Page 2)



From left: CAPT David C Stalfort, Commanding Officer, NMC; RADM Brian M. Salerno, Asst. Commandant for Marine Safety, Security, and Stewardship, USCG; Paul Hammer, Ancient Merchant Mariner; Rob Hewell, Asst. Regional Administrator, U.S. GSA; Leslie Staples; and RADM James A. Watson IV, USCG, officially open the National Maritime Center in Martinsburg, WV.

Photo by Journal photographer Ron Agnir

## **Dedication Ceremony**

**(Continued from Page 1)**

safe and secure," are at the heart of the Coast Guard's Prevention program, a program responsible for the U.S. government's efforts to ensure that there are no collisions, fires and disasters on America's waterways, said Rear Admiral James A. Watson IV, director of Prevention Policy for Marine Safety, Security and Stewardship.

"There are millions of people who use the waterways, who keep our waters safe. That the marine transportation system runs smoothly and effectively is a huge part of our national economy," RADM Watson said. "The waterways are very dear to us all."

Ensuring the success of the NMC mission—to issue credentials to fully qualified mariners in the most effective and efficient manner possible—are U.S. Coast Guard CAPT David C. Stalfort, Commanding Officer of the NMC, and Mr. Brian "Ike" Eisentrout, who serves as Deputy Director of the NMC.

In the short six months since the NMC has been operating, barriers have been broken and results never before achieved in the history of the Mariner Licensing and Documentation program are being accomplished here, CAPT Stalfort said.

"We've restructured the mission of the National Maritime Center to now focus solely on credentials, course approvals and training for the mariners," he said. "We've launched efforts to centralize the evaluations of credentials, and the production of applications submitted by 60,000 mariners annually; an effort which will be completed in December 2008.

"We've launched new online services such as application tracking, online user fee payments, a sea service calculator and we've begun to develop a secure electronic application system enabling mariners to submit their credentials in a much faster, more efficient manner.

"More importantly, we've listened to the mariners who have complained and we've streamlined the credential application process based on their feedback," CAPT Stalfort said.

Rear Admiral Brian Salerno, Assistant Commandant for Marine Safety, Security and Stewardship, praised the efforts of CAPT Stalfort and the NMC staff, adding that such a facility has been a longtime coming.

"I think most of you in the maritime industry are painfully aware that for many years, we had this hanging over our heads. We knew we had to do something to improve the process of credentialing our merchant mariners," RADM Salerno said. "This facility represents a major step in achieving our goal.

"Ultimately, what we're doing today is not just dedicating the building. We're talking about improving the process of credentialing merchant mariners vital to the Coast Guard's mission of safety, security and environmental stewardship," he said. "Today is about the mariner's themselves. It's about the industry that employs them. It's about training facilities and unions that are dependent on our processing."

To the Coast Guard's industry partners, RADM Salerno said, "We're very grateful for your involvement and patience in having worked with us over the past several years. We know that even though this is a milestone event today, we're not done yet."

Rob Hewell, assistant regional administrator with U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), said the success of this building project is the result of a collaborative partnership among the U.S. Coast Guard, the General Services Administration, U.S. Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-WV), the City of Martinsburg and the contractors who helped construct the facility.

"On behalf of GSA and all our contractors, we're honored to have had the opportunity to serve the U.S. Coast Guard."

While U.S. Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-WV) could not attend the dedication ceremony, he issued the following statement: "The U.S. Coast Guard and West Virginia share many similarities. Both have a small, but versatile and highly skilled workforce; both have always been a little underestimated; and both value their heritage and time-honored traditions," he said. "Both have a bright future because they are willing to forge ahead with innovative solutions and a 'can do' attitude."

During the ceremony, honored ancient merchant mariner, Paul Hammer reflected on the 9,300 merchant mariners killed and the 1,500 ships sunk, coupled with the roughly 600 mariners who were prisoners of war and another 11,000 who were injured during World War II. Hammer said, "On their behalf we wish this center fair winds and following seas."

By Michael C. Lewis

# Ship Rider Program Clears Way for *Pacific Link*

By Louis Novak

In April, I took advantage of the Coast Guard's Ship Rider program. As a Course Evaluator at the NMC and a licensed U.S. Merchant Marine officer, I was able to serve as second mate aboard the New Zealand flagged vessel *Pacific Link*.

The Ship Rider program promotes the familiarity of Coast Guard personnel with ships, shipping and the sea. A ship rider may observe the operations of a vessel and, if qualified, may stand watch under certain conditions. In my case, I got permission by the command to volunteer aboard the medical relief vessel that is operated by Marine Reach.

I arrived in Auckland, New Zealand, a day before scheduled sailing in order to familiarize myself with the bridge equipment and charts that would be employed in the course of the voyage to the port of Suva in the Fiji Islands.



The *Pacific Link* is 37 meters long, registers 238 tons and was originally built as a Japanese training/fishing vessel. Her propulsion is a 900 horsepower Daihatsu with a single controllable pitch propeller and rudder. She handles like a barrel while in slow bells.

The ship's crew was all volunteer and international, representing such countries as New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Denmark and Norway.

The next day was spent fueling up the *Pacific Link*, and then departing. Two hours after the ship left the port of Auckland and headed north, the winds known as the 'Roaring Forties' struck. This belt of wind blows steadily above 20 knots and nearly uninterrupted around the globe in the southern hemisphere.

The swells were consistently greater than 20 feet, which causes quite a bit of motion on a vessel of that size. Seasickness was the rule. Lookouts arrived on watch with buckets.

I enjoyed seeing the numerous birds, like albatross, frigates and boobies (also know as Gooney birds). The South Pacific is quite a lonely stretch of water. I had no visual or radar contacts for over 5 days. Even after the third day there were hardly any birds. I

heard not a single radio call on MF, HF, or shortwave. As my experience has been mainly Atlantic and Mediterranean this was quite unusual.

I stood the 4-8 watch twice a day. When the skies were clear I could see a number of constellations that were pretty new to me, the Southern Cross, which is found on New Zealand's flag, being the most prominent. I also got to see the Magellanic Clouds of the Milky Way and the entire tail of Scorpio.

We arrived at Suva on the sixth day. We docked between some Taiwanese trawlers and a French



*Pacific Link* docked in the port of Suva in Fiji Islands.

cable laying ship. Sadly we were not greeted by Fijians in their famous outriggers as I had hoped.

Once alongside, we started transforming the *Pacific Link* from a passenger vessel into a hospital/dental office while alongside. With my part of the volunteer efforts over, I left the ship for a 20-hour return flight to Dulles International Airport.

My time aboard the *Pacific Link* was quite rewarding and I hope to return to her sometime in the future. I would recommend to any Coast Guard personnel to enroll in the Ship Rider program as a way to learn more about our work and to promote good will.

For more information about the Ship Rider program, visit

[www.uscg.mil/d9/D9Legal/ShipRiderInstruction.doc](http://www.uscg.mil/d9/D9Legal/ShipRiderInstruction.doc).

For questions concerning the Marine Reach program, visit [www.marinereach.com](http://www.marinereach.com).

# Credentialing at the NMC

## NMC Performance Update

Six months ago, the U.S. Coast Guard moved its National Maritime Center from Kearneysville, WV, to its new permanent facility in Martinsburg, WV. Since that time, the NMC staff has shown six months of what has been considered “remarkable” progress.

For the third month in a row, the NMC has set a new record by producing and issuing more than 3,200 mariner credentials in the month of June.

“People are seeing the hard work that everybody is doing,” said CAPT David Stalfort, Commanding Officer at the NMC, during a June All Hands meeting. “I want to remind each and every one of you that you are doing work in this building that has never been accomplished before in the licensing program.”

The NMC, together with the RECs, has streamlined the credential application process, producing some impressive results:

- 1) a 45 percent decline in the application inventory age nationwide;
- 2) a 57 percent reduction in the time it takes to evaluate an application at the NMC; statistics also show a dramatic improvement in the quality of the evaluation;
- 3) a 7 percent reduction in the overall processing time; analysis shows that credentials are being issued within 10 to 28 days, and in some cases, mariners have received renewed credentials within 7 days.

CAPT Stalfort shared with the staff that he continues to receive positive feedback about the work being done at the NMC and at the RECs. During the recent retirement of Coast Guard CAPT Arthur French, RADM Brian M. Salerno, Asst. Commandant



for Marine Safety, Security, and Stewardship, announced to the audience that for the first time ever, the Mariner Licensing and Documentation program is the “shining jewel” in the Marine Safety program.

“That’s something to be very proud of. What we’re doing here and at the RECs is going to continue to be key to the Marine Safety program,” CAPT Stalfort said.

Mariners are also commenting in the surveys they are sending to the NMC. “If they’re praising us, take pride in what you’re doing,” he said. “If they’re criticizing us, learn why they’re criticizing us and try to prevent the problems from happening again. Listen to what they’re saying and what we can do better.”

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## Sign-Up to the List Serve, Receive Updates from the NMC

Individuals who wish to learn the latest in mariner credentialing can do so by signing up to the NMC list serve at <http://cgls.uscg.mil/groups.php?ID=10>. Just click on the link and select “Subscribe” to “National Maritime Center Updates.” Type in your e-mail address, pick a password and you’re ready to go.

## What are the Mariners saying?

• **Paul David Simcox, May 13, 2008** – The process at REC Baltimore was well done, professional and timely. The Mariner's School did a fine job preparing me for the exam and providing general information.

• **Douglas Abbott, May 13, 2008** – I was in the transition period between REC issuance and the new policy of issuance at the NMC. My past experience with REC Toledo has always been excellent. Calls were returned promptly, questions were answered and the level of service and knowledge made renewal a pleasant experience. I hope the new system can meet the level of prompt, considerate and pleasant service Toledo has provided me.

• **Mark O'Neal, May 28, 2008** – I was treated very well by the National Maritime Center and my questions were answered promptly and to my satisfaction. The only problem was I had to travel to Baltimore, Md., or Charleston, SC, for my fingerprints. Both are the closest to my residence and are seven hours away. Could there possibly be satellite locations for fingerprinting, say Norfolk, Va., or other locations with a high amount of merchant mariners or service personnel? Your handling and help with my renewal was outstanding!

• **Kraig Funkey, May 28, 2008** – Somehow my credentials got misfiled in the completed section after I received my MMD. I also renewed my license, and I did not receive my license until 1 month after. I kept checking the website and kept calling. Finally, I got a hold of someone who could see what was going on and my license finally got to me. My license was under the status of "ready to print" for three and a half weeks. That does not seem right. Thank you to the persons who looked into this and got my license to me.

• **Kenneth Williamson, June 2, 2008** – I am very satisfied with the NMC. They were quick to answer questions and return my credentials. The Coast guard needs to put some sort of a satellite office in the Norfolk, Va., area. Driving to Baltimore, Md., just for fingerprints (a 5-hour trip for a 5-minute process)

is absurd with gas being \$5 a gallon. There is a large CG base in Portsmouth. Please help us out and do the small stuff, like fingerprinting in Portsmouth.

• **Patrick Brandon, June 8, 2008** – Dear U.S.C.G., You took 3 long months to process my simple application for pilotage endorsement. What gives? I already have a file, a license, an MMD and now a TWIC card. Was it that hard to figure out who I am? I can understand that things must be a little busy moving into your new place over there. I completely understand. Me and my very pregnant wife are moving into our first house. I'm sure there are many similarities, like what drapes to get and what color to paint the house and the baby's room. I guess the one difference would be that where I had to wait for you to get settled in, I (loyal citizen and customer), had my professional career on hold for three months until you approved me. While I cannot fully convey my frustration with you (NMC) by your survey, I hope this letter convinces you that your every actions and delays affect hardworking mariners. I hope to have better dealings with you in the future.

• **Larry Rebaridi, Jr., June 9, 2008** – I used the U.S.C.G. office in St. Louis, Mo., to renew my license. Although the Federal Building is a little hard to get to, with all the one-way streets, Jim Bloom and others were most helpful in aiding with my license renewal. Thank you.

• **Andrew M. Harvey, June 9, 2008** – There was one issue with my application regarding my Z card. My phone number and e-mail were included in the application, however, "snail mail" was used to request additional information. This greatly slowed the process.

• **Anonymous** – I had a difficult time figuring out what to include in my packet from the information on the NMC's website. If I had not gone to the REC, I would have done it all wrong according to the new rules.

# REC Transition Update

The recent June transitions of both Regional Examination Centers (REC) Charleston and Honolulu have been “well-received” by the mariner industry in Hawaii and South Carolina, according to the REC Chiefs.

“I think transition has had a positive affect on the industry. It’s more of an education for the maritime industry and the mariners who come in,” said REC Honolulu Chief Joe Duffy. “We continue to advise the mariner and the industry regarding the centralization.”

In addition to managing the transition, the staff is included in the change of process. “We have an open forum at REC Honolulu, receptive to advise and make suggestions up and down the management structure. It produces a better environment and product.”

Consistently, REC Honolulu has been among the leaders in turnaround time for licensing and credentialing.

“I think we can expect an even quicker turnaround time, in appeals and medical issues. Now, the NMC will be the adjudicator and central point of contact for those processes. Things can only move faster.”

There is, however, at least one issue that needs to be addressed. Duffy indicated that forwarding mariner documents and licenses through Guam has created problems in the past, as the mail system on the U.S. island territory has not been operating at maximum efficiency.

“In some cases, mariners have not received the full compliment of what the REC has shipped,” he said. “We’re a little concerned about how people are going to be receiving their licenses and documents in that area. It may require some creativity.”

At REC Charleston, Chief Deb Myers said the transition to a storefront operation, where the staff will administer exams to mariners and ensure their

applications are ready for evaluation at the NMC, has gone “pretty well.”

“It was a little confusing in the beginning when your personnel are working on applications submitted before the transition date and those submitted after the transition date because different processes apply,” said Myers, who has worked at the REC since 1973. “To this point, I think its gone pretty well. It’s probably because we spent so much time on the Credential Inventory Aging (CIA) reports.”

CIA reports list mariners whose applications are pending, or waiting to be evaluated. The RECs in transition were informed by the National Maritime Center early on to focus on their CIA reports.

“We started working on the reports right away to get mariners evaluated and to make sure the tracking status for each was correct,” Myers said. “It was a struggle to keep up with our everyday work and also work on those reports at the same time. Once we started transition, I was a tyrant when it came to keeping my staff focused on those reports. Every time they saw me coming with a long print out, they wanted to run and hide.”

Dealing with mariners can get a little confusing, especially during the first week of transition, she said, adding, “It’s really hard to get out of that ‘evaluator mindset.’ I can guarantee you that I will never miss evaluating.

“We haven’t gotten many complaints from the mariners. Once you explain to them the process, they just accept it and move on,” Myers said. “They ask how long it takes. We tell them, ‘If you don’t have medical or character issues, the NMC, generally, has a quicker turnaround time than the REC,’ so our customers haven’t voiced strong opposition to the transition.”

By Michael C. Lewis

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## REC Workgroup Focuses on Future

The U.S. Coast Guard hosted a workgroup last week at the National Maritime Center for representatives of the Regional Examination Centers. The focus of the two-day session, held in conjunction

with the dedication of the NMC, sought to answer questions concerning daily REC operations and to determine standard credentialing procedures for

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# REC Workgroup

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limited licenses and pilotage. Thirteen of the 17 REC's were represented.

During the introduction, CAPT David Stalfort, Commanding Officer of the NMC, impressed upon the group the importance of their role in centralization and addressed the tough questions presented by the representatives.

"It's critically important, as the foundation for Marine Safety, that we do a good job with the centralization of licensing and credentialing. That's why we're in this business—to make sure bad things, like deaths, accidents and pollution do not happen," Stalfort said. "Input from you is vital. It is critical that you're part of the solution."

Still, there are always "quarks" in the system. "We don't have all the answers. Changing the course of this ship after so many years is going to take time," he said. "If there are things we could do differently, we'll do them."

Among other topics, the representatives raised questions about how the financial change-over will occur as the NMC absorbs the REC, what is needed to maintain the appropriate billets for staff necessary to operate each exam center and about the role of the REC to meet Department of Homeland Security requirements for the Transportation Workers Identification Credential (TWIC).

Under the new, final compliance rule, mariners must obtain a TWIC card no later than April 15, 2009. Not only does this satisfy national security requirements, but the fingerprinting information also will be shared with the U.S. Coast Guard in order to conduct the safety and security checks required for the issuance of a mariner credential.

As TWIC comes online, exam centers are expected to stop fingerprinting and turn those duties over to TWIC "storefront" locations popping up across the country. The change will benefit mariners by providing more places to get fingerprinted.

"They'll be a lot more TWIC locations than there are RECs," said REC Toledo Chief Al Campolongo, who attended the session. "They're picking places that

are sensible to maritime people, places that they can get to easily."

Details still need to be worked out for funding the REC's. Since transition began, the NMC has asked the REC Chiefs for their assistance in calculating the actual REC operating costs in post-transition, as some centers require more funding than others.

"If we can document what it costs to run each REC, we can include it in our budgets," CAPT Stalfort said. "We're making changes in the licensing program that have never been done before. My job is to make sure you have the resources to do your job."

Staffing the RECs is another matter that must be determined; how many people does it take to operate the facility compared to the billets available. CAPT Stalfort suggested to the REC representatives that they demonstrate their need for a particular number of employees by creating a staffing model.

"Documenting the need for additional staffing is critical," he said. "We'll have to figure out what that workload is and adjust accordingly, either through additional staffing or by looking for efficiencies or different ways of operating."

Campolongo said he thought the workgroup went very well. "We had an excellent exchange of information to the point where we were able to make certain decisions," he said, adding that those in attendance further refined what is considered to be standard credentialing procedures.

"We want to get rid of as much inconsistency as we possibly can," he said. "There are procedures to be followed for different areas."

Ken Skuches, REC Operations Branch Chief at the NMC, agreed with Campolongo. "A lot of questions were answered. Our workgroups addressed an ongoing issue and we hope to have a definite solution on our work instruction next week," Skuches said. "It is so easy to lose sight of our true goal, getting a credential into the mariner's hands in an efficient, professional manner while keeping the industries safety in mind! The REC's see our customers' everyday; we do not. It is easy to become complacent without that constant reminder."

By Michael C. Lewis

# Coast Guard Recognizes 72<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary of Merchant Marine Act of 1936

The Merchant Marine Act of 1936 fostered the development of an “adequate and well-balanced” U.S. Merchant Marine, one that promotes the commerce of America and aids in national defense.

Signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 30, 1936, the act established the United States Maritime Commission, and required America to maintain a Merchant Marine that:

- 1) can carry all domestic waterborne commerce;
- 2) can carry a substantial portion of foreign Commerce;
- 3) is capable of serving as a naval and military auxiliary in time of war or national emergency;
- 4) is owned and operated under the U.S. flag by U.S. citizens insofar as may be practicable;
- 5) is composed of the best-equipped, safest and most suitable types of vessels constructed in the United States and manned with trained and efficient citizen personnel.

As a direct result of the act, the Maritime Commission was directed to investigate the employment and wage conditions in oceangoing shipping. After holding public hearings, the commission was instructed to incorporate minimum-manning scales, minimum-wage scales and reasonable working conditions for all officers and crews employed on various types of vessels.

The U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps, the forerunner to the U.S. Merchant Marine, was established two years after the act was passed, according to online archives. The act also established two federal subsidies for the construction and operation of merchant ships.

U.S. Rep. Schyler O. Bland, of Virginia, is known as the “father of the Merchant Marine Act of 1936.”

By Michael C. Lewis

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## Captain’s Log

(Continued from Page 1)

We’ve reached these milestones and achieved these records for one reason and one reason only - the dedication of the men and women working at the RECs and the NMC. So I extend my thanks to the many people that helped plan the restructuring and centralization project and get our West Virginia operations launched.

As we continue the hard work of restructuring and centralizing the MLD program, the workload will continue to grow, putting pressure on the staffs at the RECs and NMC. We are nothing without our people. So I ask all of the supervisors, and each of you as individuals, to look out for each other with the same dedication and devotion to duty as you look out for the mariners. As a supervisor, make sure you are providing clear expectations to your employees and

that you are doing your best to motivate and develop them so that they can reach their full potential.

As individuals, look out for each other and pitch in to help a co-worker when the going gets tough. Speak up, challenge and be the voice of reason if you sense that a co-worker, a friend, or a family member needs help. A concerned, measured suggestion could actually save a life or avert a tragedy - don’t hesitate, take care of each other. As we celebrate our nation’s Independence, please cherish your freedoms, celebrate your patriotism, and above all, stay safe.

David C. Stalfort  
Captain, U. S. Coast Guard  
Commanding Officer  
U. S. Coast Guard National Maritime Center

# A GOLDEN MARINER TO RUSSIA ON THE MURMANSK RUN

**Editor's note:** Portions of this story were quoted directly from an account written by Captain Walter S. Nicholes of his voyage to northern Russia through enemy waters during World War II.

"Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter." For the tens of thousands of merchant mariners who sailed the high seas during World War II, this famous quote by Winston Churchill epitomized their lives. Thousands perished at sea. Those who returned were changed forever.

Eighty-four-year-old Walter S. Nicholes considers himself more than fortunate to have survived his time at sea during the Second World War, when the difference between life and death came down to the ebb and flow of tides.

Nicholes graduated from the Merchant Marine Academy on January 21, 1944, licensed as a Third Mate for ocean-going ships, and commissioned as an ensign in the U.S. Naval Reserve.

In November 1944, 20-year-old Nicholes signed on as the Second Mate of the *S.S. George Steers*, a new liberty ship commencing her second voyage—this one across the Atlantic Ocean on a resupply mission to northern Russia, known as the fated "Murmansk Run."

"Wherever we sailors gathered to trade war stories, any mention of the 'Murmansk Run' still casts its spell. In our young minds, that destination forebode icy death for most ships and seamen unlucky enough to be sent there," he said. "I didn't know when I joined the ship in New York City that our destination would be northern Russia. I told my family we were bound for a safer place."

During wartime convoys, an endless line of assorted grey laden ships steamed out of the

assembly anchorage area, out past the harbor sea buoy in the earliest morning hours.

"In final convoy formation, we were a great rectangle of ships covering perhaps a square mile of ocean, some 70 freighters and tankers steaming in parallel lines and rows at about 8.5 knots on a northeasterly course toward the British Isles," he wrote.



At this rate, Nicholes said it took a month to cross the North Atlantic via zigzag routes as the winter storms of 1944 reached their top intensity.

"I remember the storms were constant and terrifying. Through days and nights, our 400-foot, 10,000 ton vessel rolled and pitched in seas that resembled moving mountains of green and black water.

"Enormous engulfing waves frequently crashed over our foredecks, and from the bridge, clinging to any available support, we'd see the forward half of the ship disappear underwater. Then all we did was pray, helpless for anything else, urging the drowning ship to lift clear once more through the tons of raging water, to level again briefly and for us to continue through the storm," he wrote.

The battering seas abated as the convoy closed on the British Isles. The sea lanes leading to major ports, however, now had become more converged and definable, clearly obvious to the enemy, he said.

**"Throughout the convoy, in our darkened wheelhouses, we shared in the hunt. We visualized the trapped U-boat below, striving by futile course and depth changes to evade the closing web of focused sound waves whose measured echoes marked its inevitable execution."**

**– Captain Walter Nicholes**

Around these narrowing sea lanes, the German submarines waited to coordinate their "wolf-pack attacks."

Of these attacks, Nicholes remembered two with clarity. One night, two American destroyers detected a German submarine on the starboard flank of the convoy.

"Like hunters with cornered prey, they maneuvered to bring their quarry between them, finally to fix it precisely, and then fire volleys of depth charges to encircle the submerged U-boat and explode, with each bomb containing 500 pounds of TNT," he wrote.

The convoy commander, Nicholes recalled, allowed some communication between the hunter escorts to be broadcast over the convoy's secondary radio network.

Nicholes wrote:  
"Throughout the convoy, in our darkened wheelhouses, we shared in the hunt. We visualized the trapped U-boat below, striving by futile course and depth changes to evade the closing web of focused sound waves whose measured echoes marked its inevitable execution.



"I remember, too, elation, knowing we'd soon get 'one of them!' I also felt empathy and sadness, knowing that a hundred young men would soon die, crushed and drowned 300 fathoms below as the sea burst through their shattered vessel.

"That is what finally happened. I remember cries over the destroyers' radio, not impersonal now, but exultant, 'We got it! That's breaking up noise! We got it!' The details after that fade. I'm sure we returned to our convoy routines, continuing to pray in our habitual way to some nameless Destiner for us to be spared the impersonal, fateful torpedo."

This event began to change Nicholes. He began reading and thinking more about war, about who wins and who loses.

"I realized that when you're fighting a war, nobody ever wins, that it doesn't solve problems. The idea of using war as a political tool is totally off the table for me," he said.

The second event, a few days later, changed the schedule of the *SS George Steers* programmed voyage, "and of course our own individual destiny."

This time, the hull plating on the *SS George Steers* was cracked by exploding depth charges dropped near the ship by an escort destroyer attacking a submerged U-boat that was trying to hide under the convoy.

During daylight, the U-boats would fire a spread of torpedoes at periscope depth into a convoy, and then dive directly into and under the convoy, remaining there until dark when they could escape. To attack these "divers," escort commanders had to weigh probable damage to some convoy vessels against trying to sink the submarine.

"Invariably, (the escort commanders) went for the kill," he wrote. "Sea water began to enter our cracked bow plates and partially fill the hold containing drums of calcium carbide."

Calcium carbide ignites into a brilliant, intensely hot flame when it contacts water. "If any of these drums leaked, that drum would instantly explode and set off the others. The forward half of the ship would disintegrate and we'd be

quickly gone," he said.

As it happened, Nicholes said he and his shipmates pumped the sea water out faster than it could enter, and they arrived safely, three days later, in Glasgow, Scotland. There, the ship was detached from the convoy, which continued to Russia, suffering the loss of several ships along the way.

In early 1945, the *SS George Steers*, and its crew, set out once again for northern Russia in a new 30-ship convoy with British and Canadian escort. The remainder of their run to the entrance of the North Sea, though bitterly cold and constantly overcast with high seas, was uneventful by combat standards.

The ship came under air attack twice. A dozen German Heinkel-111 torpedo bombers came out from Norway, but were turned back before reaching the convoy by American fighters launched from the British escort aircraft carrier, he said.

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The next day, apparently the same German squadron tried to strike again. Nicholes wrote: "This time, the carrier in heavier seas could launch only two planes and some enemy planes broke through the perimeter. One appeared to drive directly at our ship and dropped two torpedoes before being hit by fire from our own and nearby vessels.

"From my station on the bridge, I watched the stricken plane pass close over our ship, perhaps 50 feet above the funnel, and I saw the young German bombardier in his glass-enclosed compartment struggling to free himself from encumbering equipment, preparing to crash into the sea.

"In that split second, I saw he was very young, blonde and terror was on his face. The plane remained airborne only a few seconds after passing our ship, then went into the Arctic Ocean, leaving a



puff of black smoke. The torpedoes we thought could not miss us somehow did. I think the heavy seas, for which we normally had no love, saved us by deflecting the missiles."

The convoy proceeded to Molotovsk, Russia, where it remained approximately six weeks. By this time, however, Germany was near the end of its warring capability and the *SS George Steers* was no longer under threat of enemy attacks during its return voyage.

"We returned to New York City on April 27, 1945, a voyage of nearly six months," he said. "At the war's end, I was still alive, and that was all most of us ever hoped for."

Nicholes received his master's mariner credentials in January 1953 and continued sailing in the U.S. Merchant Marine until 1954.

Nicholes now resides in Shaker Heights, Ohio, and is married to Nina McLellan, whom he described as a "three-dimensional angel." He has four children from a previous marriage.

By Michael C. Lewis

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For suggestions on newsletter articles or to submit material as a guest columnist, please contact Michael C. Lewis, The Wave Editor-in-Chief, at (304) 433-3481 or by e-mail at [Michael.C.Lewis@uscg.mil](mailto:Michael.C.Lewis@uscg.mil).

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